

What insights have anthropologists been able to provide into activities such as development and famine relief?

Writing in 1950 Radcliffe-Brown instructed, “A wise anthropologist will not try to tell an administrator what he ought to do; it is his special task to provide the scientifically collected and analysed knowledge that the administrator can use if he likes”¹.

Writing in 2002, Paul Sillitoe notes that development studies is undergoing a revolution in the pursuit of ethnography and adds “Few anthropologists are involved!”². Yet when anthropology is applied to development work, the results are frequently fruitful. This essay analyses the tensions as well as the mutual gains in the relationship between anthropology and development.

When the development anthropology-oriented Arbeitsgemeinschaft Entwicklungsethnologie (AGEE) asked for formal recognition from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde (DGV) in 1987, there was outcry. Michael Schönhuth characterises internal DGV opposition as comprising: the purists – who saw applied anthropology as unscholarly, the innocents – who saw development as a destructive force

¹ A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p.85; cited here from M.G. Whisson, ‘Advocates, Brokers and Collaborators: anthropologists in the real world’, *Social Anthropology and Development Policy*, ed. Ralph Grillo and Alan Rew (Cambridge: Tavistock Publications, 1985), p.132

² Paul Sillitoe, ‘Participant observation to participatory development: Making anthropology work’, *Participating in Development: Approaches to indigenous knowledge*, ed. by Paul Sillitoe, Alan Bicker and Johan Pottier (London: Routledge, 2002), p.1

which would destroy anthropology's object of study, and the ethically correct – who regarded the development industry as ethnocentrically unethical³. Schönhuth represents the difference between participant observation and participatory research as being that in the former indigenous knowledge is harnessed to describe and translate sociocultural reality whereas in the latter it is used to transform it⁴. Donald Curtis argues that there is incompatibility at a fundamental level. The kind of information relevant to and required by actors in development projects is fundamentally different from that sought by anthropologists. Project information “may not be right, but it's good enough to act upon”⁵ and within an overall economy of information it asserts basic causal relationships. Conversely Curtis claims that anthropological studies favour devoting time to long term in-depth analyses in which the attitude to causality is that “everything relates to everything”⁶.

Nevertheless, anthropological knowledge is reported in the literature as informing development work and Curtis himself admits sometimes being able to contribute helpful advice when called upon to do so by development workers: “Many of the problems are predictable and can be analysed in terms of generalized expectations of

³ Michael Schönhuth, ‘Negotiating with knowledge at development interfaces: Anthropology and the quest for participation’, *Participating in Development: Approaches to indigenous knowledge*, ed. by Paul Sillitoe, Alan Bicker and Johan Pottier (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.140-141

⁴ Schönhuth (2002), pp.143-4

⁵ Donald Curtis, ‘Anthropology in Project Management: on being useful to those who must design and operate rural water supplies’, *Participating in Development: Approaches to indigenous knowledge*, ed. by Paul Sillitoe, Alan Bicker and Johan Pottier (London: Routledge, 2002), p.105

⁶ Curtis (2002), *ibidem*.

cause and effect that can be derived directly or indirectly from anthropological studies”⁷.

Lucy Mair suggests that had foreign advisers spoken with the village women forming women’s clubs in Indonesia circa 1979, they would have obtained greater insight into the immediate small-scale (and relatively easily satisfied) needs of the community – “vitamin pills, a scale to weigh babies, a typewriter” – rather than a pressing demand to electrify or irrigate. The implication is that without the ethnographic method, particularly a gendered ethnography, pertinent local knowledge is overlooked⁸. In this context, Curtis’ example – that of latrines improperly oriented with respect to Mecca in a Muslim country – refers to the contribution of Catherine Goyder⁹; and Mair observes that the squatter populations of Latin American *barrios* place a greater premium on plot size relative to facilities than development priorities have implied¹⁰.

Based on local knowledge accrued during 18 months of fieldwork, Alexander de Waal advocates that food relief in future be used to support rather than constrain Sudanese farmers’ migration strategies by being distributed as they return to their villages before the rains¹¹. De Waal’s perspective as an anthropologist within the harvest cycle also enables him to recognise the economic significance of immigrant labour to wealthy

⁷ *ibid.*, p.102

⁸ Lucy Mair, *Anthropology and Development* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p.78

⁹ Curtis (2002), p.103

¹⁰ Mair (1948), pp.124-5

¹¹ Alexander de Waal, *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984-1985* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.214

producers in south Darfur¹². As an application of his view that “anthropologists, to be employable, should rapidly convert themselves into something else”¹³, Curtis takes Adam Kuper’s account of a dispute over a bore-hole in Western Kalahari, Botswana, and generates a set of principles which will provide the basis for a planning praxis to compete with what he sees as the “willingness to prescribe”¹⁴ evinced by economists and engineers. As an example, in a segmentary community a project manager ought to favour multiple rather than unitary resources (hence choosing several hand pumps over one large motorised pump) and be wary if single purpose committees coalesce into one large committee that can be dominated by a single lineage.

Others see the duty of anthropologists as being to actively engage in the development process as spokespeople for the excluded. Michael G. Whisson distinguishes the roles of anthropologists as “Advocates, Brokers and Collaborators” and notes that where George Foster had faith in the ultimate good will of the bureaucratic institutions he collaborated with, it was only a difference of means which meant that unlike Bronislaw Malinowski or Jomo Kenyatta, he did not turn to impassioned advocacy to effect an amelioration of social problems¹⁵. In this regard Whisson recounts the reception of his 1965 commissioned report into the use of heroin and opium in Hong

¹² *ibid.*, p.215

¹³ Curtis (2002), p.102

¹⁴ Curtis (2002), p.107

¹⁵ Michael G. Whisson (1985), p.135

Kong, and refers to the value of well-positioned contacts remarking that, “it is easier to ignore a brilliant article in *Nature* than a pungent editorial in *The Times*”¹⁶.

Schönhuth agrees that there is a role which only anthropologists are able to fill of mediating between two epistemologies to present local values, claims and options with credibility at the development interface and thereby to empower local people¹⁷. For Trevor Purcell and Elizabeth Akinyi Onjoro, this translation consists not merely of substituting local terminology for scientific understandings of phenomena, but in explicitly using local understandings where the phenomena being referred to are the same, in order to facilitate understanding¹⁸. Acknowledging that indigenous knowledge – such as health, ecology, ethnopharmacology, agronomy, astronomy and disaster management¹⁹ – compare favourably with scientific standards, Purcell and Onjoro use a biodiversity metaphor to argue for the intrinsic worth of retaining such epistemic diversity as well as positing its beneficial consequences for collective long-term socio-political health. John Clammer argues that since ontologies determine what it is relevant to know in a given culture, they are political in the widest sense and he follows Michael Dove in claiming

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.140

¹⁷ Schönhuth, (2002) pp.154-155

¹⁸ Trevor Purcell and Elizabeth Akinyi Onjoro, ‘Indigenous knowledge, power and parity: Models of knowledge integration’, *Participating in Development: Approaches to indigenous knowledge*, ed. by Paul Sillitoe, Alan Bicker and Johan Pottier (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.180-81

¹⁹ Purcell and Onjoro (2002), p.172

that “Disputes between cultures are often the clash of ontologies”²⁰ triggered by development initiatives taken in isolation on behalf of indigenous people. It is explicitly a cosmology in the case of the Indus Basin Master Planning Project in Pakistan which Purcell and Onjoro explain prevented the widespread adoption by Chakpuri farmers of a new High Yielding Variety (HYV) wheat. Had project planners framed the HYV seed strain in the paradigm of the Chakpuri farmer’s Greco-Arabic humoral classification, they would have been able to select grain perceived as wetter and cooler – and thus less likely to deplete the soil in local terms.

At its most radical, anthropology has the capacity to reconceive the overall course of development. Clammer writes that while a number of anthropologists have turned to the identification and analysis of ethical systems, largely overlooked has been “the dynamic contribution of morals to determining social goals (the higher meaning surely of development?)”²¹. Development anthropology has yet to think more holistically in terms of the self/personhood/identity categories of wider anthropology in formulating a broader concept of development than the purely “techno-economistic”²². This question of the fundamental bias of the development industry – labelled Eurocentric and irreducibly

²⁰ John Clammer, ‘Beyond the cognitive paradigm: Majority knowledges and local discourses in a non-Western donor society’, *Participating in Development: Approaches to indigenous knowledge*, ed. by Paul Sillitoe, Alan Bicker and Johan Pottier (London: Routledge, 2002), p.58

²¹ Clammer (2002), p.60

²² *ib.*, p.58

Cartesian by Clammer²³ – is taken up by Emma Crew. Crew reflects on her structural position as a white female NGO worker involved in stove development programmes: “I was not consciously fabricating a special domain of knowledge to vanquish African or Asian colleagues. Rather, I was being socialized within an organization which defined my social position as having a superior knowledge or skills”²⁴. This institutional disincentive to confer high value upon local knowledge is part of an ideology within development agencies which Crew claims is “still at least partially informed by the evolutionist heritage of modernization theory”²⁵. Her ethnography of development suggests that at least some of the problems encountered at the development interface could be regarded as strategic forms of resistance – “weapons of the weak” to use James Scott’s term – employed by nationals in the face of expatriate advisers adopting a subordinating power relationship²⁶.

To conclude, while the application of anthropology to development is not without tensions, arising in part out of inevitable differences in goal orientation and information delivery, the in-depth local knowledge which anthropology has access to via its methodology and its academic disposition can prove helpful to development

²³ *ib.*, p.57

²⁴ Emma Crew, ‘The Silent Traditions of Developing Cooks’, *Discourses of Development: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. by Ralph Grillo and Jock Stirrat (Oxford: Berg, 1997), p.74

²⁵ Crew (1997), p.73

²⁶ *ib.*, p.75

practitioners. Curtis argues with some persuasiveness for a development anthropology which structures its knowledge so as to hold its own – generalisation for generalisation – with its engineering and economist colleagues’ diagnoses and prescriptions in the field. Others see the insight and contribution of anthropologists to development as deriving from their mediation of emic and etic ontologies and most strikingly as a function of their ability to interrogate the very goals and institutions of development.

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